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A Soviet Decision To "Muddle Through"?

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Moscow's recent troop withdrawal from Afghanistan does not represent a significant overall reduction in Soviet combat capability or overall military posture, and sheds little light on long-term Soviet military intentions. The TASS announcement of the withdrawal did not address the possibility of further withdrawals and did not rule out the possibility of future increases in the number of Soviet forces in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the use of the announcement as a broad political gesture does make it somewhat less likely that the Soviets will decide in favor of a substantial augmentation of their presence in Afghanistan in the near term.

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President Brezhnev's optimistic justification for the withdrawal, which was expressed at the Central Committee's first foreign policy plenum in five years, also suggests that the Soviets are not planning an imminent buildup in their military presence in Afghanistan. Brezhnev contended on 23 June that "life is gradually returning to normal" in Afghanistan and gave the impression that Soviet forces had control over the situation. Barring a major reversal or humiliation in Afghanistan, any sudden augmentation of Soviet forces would undermine the party leader's credibility.

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The withdrawal was designed in part to deflect Western efforts to arrange a more substantial Soviet pullout from Afghanistan and to contribute to perceived differences within the Western alliance on the appropriate strategy for handling the Afghan crisis. In view of the political timetable between East and West for the rest of the year, the Soviets may find it awkward to engage in any significant increase in their military presence before next year.

-- Moscow presumably would not endorse a major military increase before the end of the Olympics in early August.

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- The start of the CSCE review conference in September, which culminates in the Madrid meeting in November, might also inhibit a Soviet reinforcement decision before the onset of winter in Afghanistan.

Just as the Soviet party tried to put the best face possible on events in Afghanistan before the plenum meeting in June, it may similarly want to avoid any difficult decision on augmentation of forces before the next party congress in February. [redacted]

It is no more certain the Soviets would decide to augment their presence in Afghanistan during the winter months in order to prepare for a spring offensive in 1981. There is no clear evidence, for example, that either Soviet field commanders in Afghanistan or political-military leaders in Moscow favor a drastic escalation of their military presence. [redacted]

[redacted] Moscow underestimated the Western and Islamic response to the invasion, which would inhibit a future decision in favor of serious augmentation. Such Politburo members as Brezhnev, Kosygin, and Chernenko might argue that the Soviets have had some limited success in stabilizing the military situation in several key provinces and in improving the security conditions along key roads to Kabul and that current force levels and tactics should continue to be tested. The current tug of war over the next five-year plan, which would be affected by any additional economic sanctions against the USSR, might also inhibit discussion of a decision in favor of significant military reinforcement. [redacted]

Indeed, it is also possible that certain Soviet leaders would argue that the Soviets have faced the worst of both international reaction and insurgent resistance, and that current force levels in Afghanistan are sufficient. Their position would be that the USSR had already had a certain amount of success in Afghanistan in terms of obtaining Moscow's basic goal--to wit, preventing the collapse of the political and military institutions that the Soviets had helped to mold. Such a collapse would have made an Amin regime or its successor susceptible to transformation into another militantly Islamic state or vulnerable to Chinese or Western influence. These

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geopolitical and strategic calculations were uppermost in Moscow's mind in deciding to intervene and, on that basis, any consideration of a massive reinforcement of Soviet forces would be premature. [REDACTED]

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Such a Soviet faction would argue that the cost of the military intervention in Afghanistan at current force levels is acceptable and the absence of leadership for the popular opposition to the Babrak government obviates the need for additional Soviet forces. Conversely, it would be difficult to obtain a new consensus in favor of augmentation in view of possible Soviet opposition to taking on even greater responsibilities in Afghanistan for internal security, operations against the insurgency, and increased administrative duties. Therefore, the Soviet leadership could very well decide to muddle through in the foreseeable future with current force levels or modest reinforcements rather than create the impression both at home and abroad that a significant increase in the Soviet presence in Afghanistan meant that the situation was getting out of hand. [REDACTED]

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-- MEL GOODMAN

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